

The Queen's Hand in *The Merchant of Venice*

Elliott Baker

On the 18th of July in the year 1290, by act of King Edward I, all Jews were ordered to leave England. More than three hundred and fifty years were to pass before Oliver Cromwell tabled the motion which officially allowed their return. Being a realist, Cromwell preferred Jews to Papists, especially when he compared the commerce of Amsterdam with that of Rome. During the interim, the alien population of Elizabethan London never exceeded ten thousand and the most generous estimate of the number of Jews in the entire country has been less than one hundred. The noted Sir Sidney Lee could positively identify only five but suspected that there were several more who practiced their religion secretly.

With a population ranging between a handful and five score it's no wonder that Jews get little mention in the records of the time. One entry indicates that the payment for the whipping of a Jew was thrice that for whipping a Welshman.¹ And the last persons to die at the stake in England because of their religion (1612) were two "Aryans" whose teachings were held to approximate those of Judaism.²

The compact majority of America can identify with this. After all, the sponsors of Columbus similarly banished Jews from Spain during that watershed year of 1492. Yet, another explanation has to be found for their predilection for products of an anti-Semitic time and place.³ For none of the thousands of interpretations of Shakespeare's works have claimed that the plays deviated from conventional Elizabethan ethics, and the endless list of virtues attributed to the man himself do not include his ever advancing an unpopular opinion—with one notable exception.⁴

This, of course, is the famous speech by Shylock.

Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is?

Novelist and essayist Elliott Baker has recently finished a novel centered on the Dr. Roderigo Lopez affair and trial.

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If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? (III.i)

The debate about whether *The Merchant of Venice* in its entirety is anti-Semitic or not is immaterial. That one speech cannot be questioned. In a time and place when “Jew” was pre-fixed by “vile” and followed by “cur” or “dog,” of an audience no different from that at Tyburn, which the Mayor of London described as composed mostly of “thieves, horse stealers and whore mongers,” who hissed Barrabas and salivated at boar fights on the same day, this playwright, forever anxious to entertain, always careful not to offend, asked through the mouth of his villain if a Jew was any different from themselves.

Had the play been written to be performed at Court, this might not have been so dangerous. Her Majesty apparently was not unacquainted with Hebraic tradition. (Hadn’t her father invoked *Leviticus* to justify the annulment of a marriage?) Dr. John Dee, her personal astrologer, was a favorite partner for conversations devoid of politics and his Kabbalistic writings show him well steeped in medieval Jewish mysticism.⁵

But Shylock was asking the *mob* if his organs, dimensions, senses, etc., weren’t the same as theirs. Given the false consciousness of the age, it was a brave and noble act, probably unequaled in theatrical history and possibly adding a new dimension to the playwright who provides “the most satisfying intensity of all.”⁶ For since almost everything ever said about Shakespeare has admittedly been based on an assumption, it’s fair to consider one more.

Was William Shakespeare Jewish? More outrageous suppositions have been advanced. Because 72 different kinds of birds are mentioned in the plays, he’s been given an honorary degree in ornithology. And more recently in the visual arts.⁷ Experts have repeatedly cast him in their own image. So to Canon Beeching he was a teetotler⁸ and to Frank Harris a phallic narcissist.⁹ A Jewish American professor treating him as a fellow “lanzman” would only be following suit.¹⁰ Why not? The standard ploys of Shakespearean scholarship have used the architecture of the unknown to support edifices just as lacking in credibility. This one, at least, has some substance worthy of examination.

II

It is generally accepted that *The Merchant* derived from one of the tales in Ser Giovanni’s *Il Pecorone*. Since this had not been translated into English at the time *The Merchant* was written, it has been necessary to credit Shakespeare with enough knowledge of Italian to have read it in the original. One authority even has him journeying to Venice with a group of players and somehow finding his way to the Nazione Tedesca section, which was the center of usury, but there is no evidence of his ever having set foot east of Gravesend.

Other source material has been suggested at times. There are traces in the

play of Robert Wilson's *The Three Ladies of London* and *The Orator* by Alexander Silvayn. The influence of Thomas Dekker's *Joseph, The Jew of Venice*, the play not extant, can only be suspected. Wilson is the most interesting connection. Fleay believes that Shakespeare learned his craft under his tutelage and Wilson's writings seemed to have disappeared after 1589.¹¹

These sources, however, provide only the basic story and some characters. None account for the texture of the play and the knowledge behind it. In spite of orthodox Jewish opposition to literature, a number of Hebrew secular plays from the early Renaissance have survived. Since some were written in Italy, they also enter the picture.

The christening of characters always furnishes some insight into those who give them fictional life. The names Shakespeare chose have been a popular guessing game; if anything, more so in this play than the others. Gobbo, Shylock's servant and the unfunniest clown in the repertoire, has sometimes owed his name to Sir Robert Cecil because gobbo means hunchback in Italian and Cecil had that deformity. But it's unlikely that Shakespeare would mock the son of Lord Burghley, the most powerful man in the kingdom. Another interpretation is that the playwright, wanting to localize the character, added an "o" to "gob" (as in mouthful) because the servant talks so much.¹² But it has also been pointed out that the name could come from Gibeonite. Some attempts have been made to link characters in the play with real people, associating the merchant, Antonio, for example, with Don Antonio, the pretender to the throne of Portugal who was then in England.

The Jewish characters, Jessica and Tubal, have deservedly received more serious analysis, for neither appears in *Il Pecorone* and both names are pre-Israelite and have parallels in the Book of Genesis.¹³ But it is Shylock who takes center stage. At this distance in time, it is impossible to say if the emotion aroused by the name has been honed by the character or if the very sound produced by the syllables conjures up an image of greed. But when a proper name becomes a byword of the language it has been well chosen.

Again, there have been varied explanations. Suggested Hebrew derivations include Saul, Seol, and Shiloch.¹⁴ The last would seem the most reasonable. There also was a 17th century pamphlet which contained the predictions of a Jewish prophet named Shillocke.¹⁵

Names, like statistics, can be used to prove anything, so we turn elsewhere. The three thousand ducats for a pound of flesh provides a possibility. Jessica's insistence that the pound of flesh be taken from the merchant's heart hints that Shylock may have had another region in mind. That might explain the play's original title—*The Comical History of The Merchant of Venice*. Though there is some comedy in the play, it can hardly be classified as such. Heywood's long-

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standing definition that “comedies begin in trouble and end in peace” applies as well to romances and fairy tales and most melodramas.¹⁶ But if Shylock’s incision in lieu of payment for the bond was to be made two feet lower down it would certainly be a focal point for farce.¹⁷ The fact that so much of English humor is rooted in the rectum and its Jewish counterpart is centered in the groin deserves contemplation.¹⁸

Left for last is the most essential consideration of all. That is the connection between Shylock, the dramatic creation, and Dr. Roderigo (Ruy) Lopez, the tragic victim.

III

The 15-volume *Oxford History of England* devotes one sentence to Dr. Roderigo Lopez.

The execution of Dr. Lopez, the royal physician, for an alleged attempt to murder the queen by poison (1594) shows the strength of the public apprehension on this score, even if the evidence that sent him to the block was not conclusive.¹⁹

The allotted space is as objectionable as the evasive phrasing. Scholars of the Tudor Age are unanimous in describing the evidence as more fraudulent than inconclusive. It’s surprising that while the exhumation of history’s injustices remains a thriving industry, so little attention has been given to this particular case.

The already mentioned Sir Sidney Lee openly confronted the villain of *The Merchant*. His essay, “The Original of Shylock,”²⁰ was the first affiliation of the Venetian moneylender with Queen Elizabeth’s personal physician. Lee also provided the entry on Dr. Lopez in the *Dictionary of National Biography*.

The year and place of birth are not certain. Lee allows a decade (1520-1530) for the former and while calling Lopez a native of Portugal adds that it’s not unlikely he was born in England. Wherever, he was a Marrano (Portugese Jew) by descent and like most of that small colony in England he converted to Christianity. The dates charting his career are more definite. By 1569, he was a member of the College of Physicians and in 1575 he was the first to hold the office of House Physician at St. Bartholomew’s Hospital.²¹ Before then he had been doctor to Sir Francis Walsingham and Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester. His association with Leicester was to become a source of scandal. Leicester’s wife, Amy Robsart, had died under mysterious circumstances, apparently removing the sole impediment to his becoming husband of the Queen. It was well known that both desired the marriage and Amy’s death had long been anticipated and poison predicted as the cause. Lord Burghley, not one to gossip, confided as much to the Spanish Ambassador. When Amy was found dead at the foot of a stairway, her neck broken, the rumors were quickly

amended to her having been fed a potion which produced dizziness and led to the fall. A pamphlet by a Jesuit priest in 1584 included Dr. Lopez as one of those whom Leicester employed to dispose of his enemies.²² The pamphlet was immediately suppressed by the Crown but continued to be secretly circulated. Two years later, Queen Elizabeth appointed Dr. Lopez her personal physician. From 1586 until his arrest in 1593 he remained so. He was executed at Tyburn on the 7th of June, 1594.

Though far from complete, Sir Sidney Lee's account of the life of Lopez amounts to a much thicker dossier than we have on William Shakespeare. But Lee's theory that Shylock was modeled on Lopez is found wanting. To equate Lopez's last words from the scaffold, "I love the Queen as well as I love Jesus Christ!" with Shylock's initial assessment of Antonio, "I hate him for he is a Christian..." (I.iii) is to attempt a new high in theoretical desperation. Yet others have followed Sir Sidney's lead. For example, the rightly esteemed John Dover Wilson so leapt on Gratiano's words in the play:

Thy currish spirit/Govern'd a wolf, who hang'd for human slaughter—"
(IV.i)

Shakespeare seemed to have enjoyed puns as much as Dr. Johnson hated them and "Wolf" is a translated pun on the name Lopez. With such thin strands have the usurer and doctor been tied together, but most modern editions of the play and program notes accompanying its production mention their possible connection.

The main source materials on Dr. Lopez consist of John Stow's *Annals*, William Camden's *The True and Royal History of Elizabeth*, the *State Papers: Elizabeth* and the records of both St. Bartholomew's Hospital and the Royal College of Physicians. The record of his trial consists of the confessions of the two spies tried with him and an account prepared by Charles Yetswiert, one of the Queen's secretaries. The confessions do not read as if voluntary, nor the account unbiased. What may be the most masterly indictment ever written, *A True Report of the Detestable Treason Intended by Dr. Roderigo Lopez*, by Francis Bacon, was not part of the judicial proceedings.

When the facts are scarce and suspect, the pseudo-science of history must make some deference to reason. An attempted assassination demands either motive or madness. That for which Dr. Lopez was tried and executed contained neither, so it has been necessary to look elsewhere. In the intricate Court of Elizabeth each twisted corridor branched into several others. Only by exploring them all is it possible to find the hidden passage where Dr. Lopez and Shylock meet.

IV

Roderigo Lopez was not an obvious choice to be Queen Elizabeth's personal physician, if for no other reason than her long insistence that none but

English hands touch any part of her, including her teeth. The fact that Lopez gained the appointment has to be attributed to the influence of both Leicester and Walsingham, especially the Secretary of State. As head of the secret service, Walsingham was always alert for signs of greed or ambition or weakness which could be turned to political purposes. Lopez had given indications of all three. He could be used.

The complexity of Walsingham's plotting died with him on the 6th of April, 1590. All his personal papers were burned the same day. But the plot involving Lopez had already been set in motion. The basis of all Walsingham's strategy had been to gather reliable information about the might and intent of the Spanish while spreading falsehoods about those of the English. Some of the fictions which reached King Philip and his advisers exaggerated Lopez's relationship with the Queen and his dislike of Don Antonio, the pretender to the throne of Portugal.

The two foreign agents implicated and tried along with Lopez, Manuel Luis Tinoco and Ferreira de Gama, featured in Walsingham's plan. So, too, the courier Manuel Andrada, who presented Lopez with a diamond and ruby ring, claiming it was an offering from King Philip. The Spanish objective was the disposal of Don Antonio and Walsingham did nothing to thwart it. Someone at the Court of the Escorial apparently believed the citing of Lopez in *Leicester's Commonwealth* as being "skilled with poisoning." This coupled with Lopez's reported antipathy toward the pretender made him the ideal executioner. A payment of as much as 50,000 crowns was hinted at.

It's possible that Lopez considered it. He had access to both Don Antonio and arsenic. Since Don Antonio had become a nuisance and liability to the Queen, he might even have convinced himself that he'd be pleasing her by carrying out the murder. But this is supposition. A much more substantial assumption is that if there had been nothing more involved than the death of Don Antonio, the Earl of Essex would not have pursued an equal fate for Lopez so relentlessly. His reason had to be more personal.

Essex had syphilis. The prominent surgeon, William Clowes, thought that half the men in England had it.²³ Lopez's duties sometimes included treating courtiers and he'd been dispatched to Essex House several times to attend the young Earl. The signs of syphilis at various stages are unmistakable and he'd detected some of them in Essex. Lopez is said to have betrayed this professional confidence at a dinner because of too much wine. It's difficult to believe. He wouldn't have maintained his sworn post for so many years if he hadn't excelled at discretion. Neither Francis Bacon nor the foppish Gabriel Harvey included the lack of it in their damnations of him. So probability again overrules taproom whispers. A more likely scenario is that, having detected the spirochete and knowing that Essex was sleeping with the Queen, Lopez had to alert his

monarch of the danger. Neither courage nor allegiance to her and Hippocrates were required. It wasn't hard to imagine the consequences if he failed to do so and she became infected. When informed about the rampart bacillus transmitted sexually, and always resentful of Essex's affairs with other women, the Queen would have accosted the Earl about what she'd learned and he wouldn't have had to be told the source of her information.

From then on, nothing short of the end of Dr. Lopez could satisfy Essex. All possible means were employed. Richard Topcliffe, unofficial Grand Inquisitor at the Tower of London, proved a useful accomplice and placed the rack at Essex's disposal. The wide gap between Ferriera's and Tinoco's initial confessions and final ones prove its effectiveness. Once both admitted, in remarkably similar terms, that the purpose of their actions had been the death of the Queen and that her physician was to administer the poison, the trial at the Guildhall became a mere formality. Any tarnish on Essex's honor was removed and Lopez's protestations of innocence ignored. These continued unaltered until his noose was tightened and the knife of disembowelment was readied.

"I love the Queen as well as I love Jesus Christ!"²⁴

Anything a man says at such a moment deserves attention.

V

Henslowe's Diary records a performance of "the Venesyon Comodey" on August 25th, 1594, but it has never been definitely established that the play referred to was *The Merchant of Venice*. Experts also disagree about the year of authorship of Shakespeare's play, it being variously dated between 1594 and 1598.

The early year seems the most likely. The Earl of Essex and his followers then had whipped up a popular wave of anti-Semitism bordering on frenzy in order to reinforce Essex's charges against Lopez. This atmosphere was sustained throughout his trial and lingered long after his execution. Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, presenting a human monster in the title role, received a record 15 performances during 1594. It's not unreasonable that *The Merchant of Venice* was an attempt to equal that success with a similar appeal to audience sentiment. But that famous speech of Shylock's presents problems.

It must be remembered that Essex's popularity with the people was second only to that of the Queen's. He frequented the theater often, along with his most famous supporter, the Earl of Southampton, who would someday stand trial alongside him for insurrection. Also coloring the scene and clogging the plot are the earlier dedications to Southampton by Shakespeare of *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*. That the poet managed to ingratiate himself to Southampton during the year between their publications without having been introduced to Essex is to fault the good manners of noblemen. And it was

during this same year that Lopez incurred the wrath of Essex and the young Earl proved powerful enough to send the royal physician “west to Tyburn,” the euphemism at that time for a trip to the gallows. Would a mere player and playwright tempt the same fate with a speech that contradicted Essex’s crusade by claiming mortality in a Jew? Those who believe so have been unable to discover an additional defiant act by Shakespeare in his lifetime.

There is another possibility. The most ardent admirers of the man from Stratford admit evidence of others’ pens in his plays. The meter employed in them has never been rivaled for inconsistency. What’s more, there is ample bibliographical evidence that the original version underwent revision.²⁵ The avowed possibility then is that Shylock’s revolutionary speech was not in the original version.

It so, two questions demand answers. Did Shakespeare compose the speech and (whether he did or not) why did he insert it? The reply to the first has usually been that he set out with the stereotype of a Jew in mind, but his great genius and sensitivity took over and gave the character dimension. The best alternative is that it was written by someone else. In that case, who? Thomas Dekker perhaps. He had the extensive knowledge of the law apparent in the trial scene and often revised plays. But Dekker had already written *Joseph, The Jew of Venice*.²⁶ With that play non-existent and its contents unknown, Dekker’s other writings must be consulted and these show his compassion going to those who borrow, not lend. Searching other Elizabethan plays for radical viewpoints yields next to nothing. John Fletcher came closest and could well have inherited notions of tolerance from a father who was once the Bishop of London.²⁷ But accepting the date of 1594 for the writing of *The Merchant of Venice* has Fletcher only fifteen at the time, and the latest possible year for the play’s creation still leaves him too fledgling in his career to have made a contribution.

Sir Walter Raleigh also has to be considered. He had the incentive of his rivalry with Essex and he certainly possessed the talent. A phrase like his “All wounds have scars but that of phantasy,” tossed off in a letter to Sir Robert Cecil, would have tripped smoothly from the tongue of Hamlet or the melancholy Jacques. So a scenario can be imagined with Raleigh attending a performance of the play and watching Essex relish the hissing of the audience each of the nine times that the Jew is identified with the devil; then of Raleigh, out of spite or conviction or both, writing the new speech for Shylock and ordering Shakespeare to insert it in the first scene of the third act. The playwright would then have to decide whether to please the Queen’s former lover or her present one. Given the fresh memory of the fate of Dr. Lopez, there’s little doubt which choice he’d have made.

There is one more serious contender for the authorship of the speech, and this time some blank verse to supply validity.

Where is the hell full of travail, pain, mischief and torment?
Where is the pit of cursedness, out of which doth spring all despair?
Is there any hell so profound that is sufficient to punish the tenth part of
my sins?

Not exactly on Shakespeare's level, agreed, but Queen Elizabeth I was only eleven when she wrote it. Still, the technique employed in Shylock's speech is already there. As her famous tutor Ascham reported, "She loved metaphor and simile, antithesis and epigram," and throughout her reign was to use sequential questions as a technique both in writing and speaking.²⁸

The Queen was not only capable of writing Shylock's speech, but more importantly, she had good reason to. All indications are that she never believed Lopez guilty. When Essex first tried to implicate him in a conspiracy with the Spanish, she rebuked him in front of the Cecils for being "a rash and temerarious youth." The execution of Lopez was scheduled for the 18th of April but was stayed by her orders. Her most respected biographer believed she had Lopez kept in the Tower for his own protection and that Essex managed to get him out and onto the tumbril to the scaffold by trickery (ibid).

After Lopez's death, the Queen had all of his possessions and the leases he held in London returned to his widow. The possessions did not include the diamond and ruby ring which was supposedly from King Philip of Spain. Lopez had presented it to the Queen as a gift from himself.

So a different scenario is called for. In this one the Queen, hearing of the content of the new play, demanded to see the prompt book, then composed the speech that made all Jews as human as her late physician. She might have sent for the playwright and personally commanded him to insert it. But it's questionable that Shakespeare was ever in her presence as anything but an actor. Besides, she had numerous courtiers at hand to deliver her composition to the theater. My casting would be of Sir Robert Cecil, who had sufficient political heft and was characterologically suited for such an errand.

Whatever the procedure, the speech went into Act III, scene i, and when Essex first heard it with disbelief and stormed backstage to demand that it come out, he was shown the royal decree. Then the Earl hopped on his white charger and rode swiftly to Hampton Court or Windsor and confronted the Queen about it and was promptly told, as she'd once told Leicester whom she'd loved more than any man, that "I will have here but one mistress and no master."²⁹ She might have cuffed him once or twice to drive her point home, but Shylock's new speech was probably blow enough. Had the Earl taken heed his head wouldn't have been separated from his shoulders at such a ripe young age. In any event, the speech remained in the play from then to now and it will never be known how many years elapsed before audiences stopped jeering it.

Removing the speech from *The Complete Works* leaves us a bard with

conventional Tudor prejudices. It is only those lines to be accounted for. If a more plausible explanation of them exists than that presented here, it has yet to surface.

Notes

1. Ipswich records, 1572.
2. Cecil Roth, *A History of the Jews in England* (London, 1940).
3. J.E. Neale, *Essays in Elizabethan History*. "In my post-war reading about the Hitler regime, I was struck by its resemblance to personal monarchy in the 16th century with many of the stresses and strains familiar to me in Elizabethan history."
4. For purposes of the argument advanced in this essay, "Shakespeare" is used in the conventional sense.
5. G. Lloyd Jones, *The Discovery of Hebrew in Tudor England*.
6. Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*. 1988.
7. James R. Siemon, *Shakespearean Iconoclasm*. 1985. "Shakespeare himself seems to have done work as a visual artist, making an impression for James I in 1613."
8. Canon (H.C.) Beeching, *William Shakespeare: Player, Playmaker, and Poet* (London, 1908).
9. Frank Harris, *The Man Shakespeare and His Tragic Life-Story*. 1909.
10. J.L. Cardoza, *The Contemporary Jew in Elizabethan Drama*. 1925. "The writer of the play (*The Merchant of Venice*) had to be a good Hebrew scholar since the four Jewish names in the play occur in the Old Testament."
11. Frederick Gard Fleay, *A Chronicle History of the Life and Work of William Shakespeare*. 1886.
12. Leonard Tennenhouse, *The Counterfeit Order of The Merchant of Venice*. 1980.
13. S. J. Schonfeld, "A Hebrew Source for The Merchant of Venice," *Shakespeare Survey*, 1979.
14. Barbara K. Lewalski, *Biblical Allusion and Allegory in The Merchant of Venice*. "Shylock's name is probably taken from Shalach, translated by "Cormorant"—an epithet often applied to usurers in Elizabethan English." (The OED lists "peasant" and "tyrant" in the middle English etymology of "cormorant.")
15. Cecil Roth, *Personalities and Events in Jewish History*.
16. Thomas Heywood, *Apology for Actors* (London, 1612).
17. In Anthony Munday's *Zelato*, the Christian usurer demands the right eyes of those failing to repay a loan.
18. Frederick S. Boas, *Shakespeare and His Predecessors*. "The tale of the Bond, with a pound of flesh as the forfeiture, has been variously traced back to Eastern,

Teutonic and Roman sources.”

19. *The Oxford History of England*, Volume VIII (“The Reign of Elizabeth, 1558-1603”), 1936.

20. *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, 1880.

21. *Medical History* (The Official Journal of the British Society for the History of Medicine), Volume XVII, 1973.

22. The pamphlet, entitled *Dialogue Between a Scholar, A Gentleman, and A Lawyer*, was nicknamed “Father Parson’s Green Coat” because Robert Parsons was suspected of authoring it. Later, it became known as *Leicester’s Commonwealth*.

23. William Clowes, *A Short and Profitable Treatise Touching the Cure of the Disease* (London, 1579).

24. John Stow, *The Annales of England* (London, 1614). William Camden, *The True and Royal History of the famous Empresse Elizabeth* (London, 1625).

25. *The Merchant of Venice*. Clarendon edition. Eds. Clark and Wright. Arden edition. Ed. John Russell Brown.

26. Kenneth Muir and others refer to the play by this title. The only entry of the play in the Stationer’s Register (1653) lists it as *The Jew of Venice*.

27. Philip J. Finkelpearl, *Court and Country Politics in the Plays of Beaumont and Fletcher*. 1990.

28. J.E. Neale, *Queen Elizabeth I*. 1934.

29. Sir Robert Naunton, *Fragmenta Regalia*. Naunton was Secretary of State to King James I.